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# **Rapid Evidence Review:** Reimagining the Employment System of Australia

Centre for Behavioural  
and System Change

# About this document

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This document summarises the key insights from a rapid evidence review conducted by BIT on behalf of System 2. The research was conducted as part of the Reimagining the Employment System of Australia project, funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation (PRF). Research activities took place from January to March 2023, and therefore many of the findings reflect the status of the employment services system at that time. This document provides a high-level summary of the current state of play of the employment services system, focusing particularly on the key challenges and opportunities for change.

## The purpose of this rapid evidence review is to:

- Give a high-level overview of the demographic characteristics of the **two target cohorts** of the research – namely:
  1. **Young people:** Individuals aged 15-24 years who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).
  2. **Parents:** Families with dependents under the age of 15 years where no persons are employed (single- or dual-carer families).
- Identify core themes that emerged from interviews with experts, practitioners and policymakers, to identify key challenges in the employment services system, and potential opportunities to better support job seekers with complex needs
- Identify key behavioural science concepts relevant to the challenges and opportunities, by relying on our deep expertise in behavioural science literature and practice
- Complement insights from expert interviews with key findings from a rapid review of academic and grey literature.

This rapid evidence review is not intended to be exhaustive or comprehensive. Rather, it serves as the foundation for the next critical component of this research project, where the BIT research team will conduct field observations at three locations to further explore the delivery of key programs and services, and will also deliver in-depth interviews with people with lived experience from our two target cohorts to understand the experience and needs of individuals. Findings from this rapid evidence review, the field observations and the in-depth interviews will inform the design of policy and program ideas to reimagine the employment services system and better support our target cohorts.

## About System 2

[System 2](#) is a not-for-profit focused on tackling complex social issues by combining behavioural science, systems thinking and insights from deep collaboration with those with lived experience. System 2 was created by the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) and Nesta in 2022 with the launch mission of enabling young people experiencing disadvantage to thrive. Our inaugural project on reimagining employment services was delivered in partnership with BIT and in collaboration with YLab.

# Contents and acknowledgements

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|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Definitions of key terms</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Executive summary</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Introduction</b>   | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>Prevalence of young people not in education, employment or training and parents from jobless households in Australia</b> | <b>13</b> |
| <b>Risk factors and characteristics of young people and parents</b>   | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Challenges and opportunities in the employment services system</b>   | <b>20</b> |
| • Overview of key themes  | 24        |
| • Detailed summary of key insights  | 29        |
| <b>Case studies</b>   | <b>45</b> |
| <b>Next steps</b>   | <b>51</b> |
| <b>Appendices</b>   | <b>53</b> |

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank and acknowledge the 27 experts who participated in in-depth interviews as part of the first phase of this project. The insights obtained from the interviews were critical in rapidly developing our understanding of the current state of the employment services system, and gaining insight into how some of the key programs and policies are delivered in practice. We are grateful for their time, expertise and openness.

# Definitions of key terms used throughout this report

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- **Behavioural insights:** The practical application of concepts from behavioural science to design policies, programs and communications that are aligned with how people behave and make decisions in a real-world context.
- **Behavioural science:** The study of human behaviour through the use of systematic experimentation and observation, including disciplines such as behavioural economics, psychology, sociology, neuroscience and anthropology.
- **Employers:** Refer to people and businesses that employ people.
- **Employment services providers (providers):** Organisations that are contracted by the government to provide employment services, including providing information and support to job seekers. Service providers also play a key role in monitoring and reporting on job seeker compliance.
- **Employment services system** (also referred to as “**the system**” in this report): The actors who are involved in delivering employment services (including job seekers, service providers, nonprofit organisations, all levels of government, and employers), the interactions between these actors and the rules that govern their behaviour.
- **Government:** In this report, ‘government’ is used to refer to the federal government, unless otherwise stated.
- **Job agents:** Refers to the frontline staff that deliver employment services, and who are employed by employment service providers.
- **Jobless families:** Households with dependents under the age of 15 years where no persons are employed.
- **Jobless household:** A household in which no person of working age is employed.
- **Job seekers:** Individuals who receive income support and participate in the employment services system.
- **Lived experience:** Individuals who have direct, recent experience of interacting with the employment services system.
- **Mutual Obligation Requirements (MORs; also referred to as “mutual obligations” or “compulsory activities”):** The tasks and activities that job seekers agree to complete in exchange for receiving income support payments.
- **Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET):** Individuals who are not participating in education, employment or training. Note, for the purposes of this report, “NEET” is used to refer to individuals aged 15-24 years who are not in education, employment or training, unless otherwise specified.
- **Vocational barriers:** Training, skills or qualification gaps that present challenges for individuals seeking employment.
- **Non-vocational barriers:** Barriers that can hinder an individual's ability to participate in education, employment or training, including homelessness, lack of transport, mental or physical health challenges, drug or alcohol addiction, or abuse, among other barriers.
- **Workforce Australia:** The employment service delivered by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. Workforce Australia is also the name given to mainstream employment service programs, which can be delivered by service providers. For a list of key programs, see [Appendix 1](#).

# Executive summary: Background

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**The current approach to employment service delivery in Australia is ineffective in meaningfully supporting job seekers, especially those with complex needs.** The Paul Ramsay Foundation (PRF), one of Australia's largest philanthropic funders, is committed to tackling cycles of disadvantage, and employment is one of the foundation's key strategic focus areas. In 2022-23, PRF funded research to reimagine the employment services system for job seekers with complex needs. This research was delivered by System 2 in partnership with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT).

**This project focuses on reimagining the employment system to better support two target cohorts:**

1. **Young people:** Individuals aged 15-24 years who are not in education, employment or training (NEET)
2. **Parents:** Families with dependents under the age of 15 years where no persons are employed (single- or dual-carer families).

**This project involves primary and secondary research, deeply informed by collaboration with people with lived experience, across three phases:**

1. **Rapid evidence review of the system:** including interviews with experts and a rapid literature scan, summarised in this report
2. **Exploratory research with target cohorts:** including in-depth interviews and fieldwork
3. **Solution prototypes and implementation plans:** including co-design with people with lived experience and other stakeholders, to design solution ideas that would meaningfully support young people and/or parents, which could be piloted and evaluated

This rapid evidence review report represents the output of Phase 1.

# Executive summary: Challenges and opportunities (1 of 2)

This rapid evidence review summarises the key insights from interviews with 27 experts, and findings from a complementary rapid literature scan. The insights have been grouped based on the primary actor of the challenge or opportunity, resulting in the following **four categories**:

Category  
(primary actor):

## 1. Service providers

## 2. Job seekers

Overarching  
finding:

**Employment service providers operate within a set of structures, incentives and practices that don't serve the needs of young people or parents**

**The system takes a highly individualised approach focused on narrow employment outcomes**

Key themes:

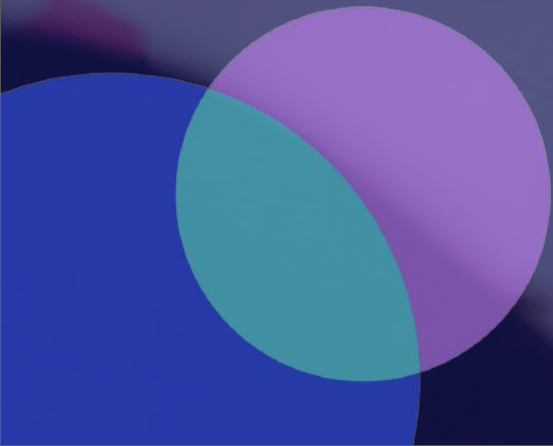
- 1.1** The government's approach to employment services contract management hinders the ability for service providers to deliver quality, effective services and to collaborate with each other
- 1.2** Providers are primarily paid based on performance outcomes, and the blunt tools used to measure success discourage providers from investing in job seekers with complex needs
- 1.3** The burden of administrative requirements squeezes out the time and opportunity for service providers to focus on the relational aspects of supporting job seekers
- 1.4** The provider workforce is often poorly trained and poorly paid, with many job agents lacking the experience, skills and tools to be able to effectively support disadvantaged job seekers with complex needs

- 2.1** Mutual obligation requirements reinforce the onus on the job seeker as an individual who needs to be 'activated' and prove compliance
- 2.2** The strict focus on mutual obligations, and service provider staff turnover, erodes job seeker trust in the system
- 2.3** The current system fails to tap into the power of relationships and social networks
- 2.4** The focus on rudimentary employment outcomes can individualise a systemic issue and fail to recognise the impact of non-vocational barriers to employment
- 2.5** The fragmented system is difficult for individuals to navigate, exacerbated by overlapping programs, multiple points of entry and different eligibility requirements

# Executive summary: Challenges and opportunities (2 of 2)

| Category (primary actor): | 3. Employers  | 4. The system   |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Overarching finding:      | <b>Employers are a critical actor in the system, but they are generally disconnected and disengaged</b>   | <b>There is a severe lack of understanding about what works, for who and why, hindering effective feedback loops within the system</b>  |
| Key themes:               | <p><b>3.1</b> Very few employers engage with service providers, and many hold negative stereotypes about the job seekers referred by providers</p> <p><b>3.2</b> Employers strongly prefer to recruit individuals who are job ready and experienced, and have limited engagement with training and work experience programs</p> | <p><b>4.1</b> There is little robust evidence of what works; system actors need mechanisms to test, measure, share learnings and scale-up effective policies and programs</p> <p><b>4.2</b> Tools used to measure success of services are blunt; better measures (including job seeker feedback and human capability measures) are needed</p> <p><b>4.3</b> Policies, programs and services have been developed in a predominantly top-down approach, with little meaningful co-design with people with lived experience</p> <p><b>4.4</b> There is an absence of nuanced, personalised data to inform targeted approaches to support job seekers</p> |

# Introduction





# Introduction to the project

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**The employment services system is not operating effectively to support job seekers, especially those with complex needs.** The system, originally intended to be a temporary solution to unemployment issues which occurred in the aftermath of World War 2 (O'Sullivan et al., 2021), is no longer fit-for-purpose, given **1 in 3 job seekers have been in the employment services system for 12+ months, and 1 in 5 have been in this system for 5+ years** (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2018). Despite multiple iterations of the system over the 25 years since the employment services was outsourced in 1998, there appears to be little evidence of meaningful progress for disadvantaged job seekers (O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

Further, despite the strong recovery of the Australian labour market since the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020 (e61 Institute, 2022), with the national unemployment rate sitting at a record low of just 3.4% (McLeod, 2022), **individuals furthest from the labour market have been “left behind”** (e61 Institute, 2022). Moreover, despite the low national unemployment rate, there has been a 26% *increase* in the number of Australians in the employment services system compared to pre-pandemic levels. This includes approximately 111,000 young people currently in the system (McLeod, 2022). The misalignment between the low unemployment rate and the increasing number of people receiving employment support signals a key issue in the types of jobs being offered and the way that ‘success’ is measured. For example, if individuals are *employed* in insecure or low-paid work, they may still need support payments to supplement their income. We will continue to explore the reasons behind this misalignment in the next phase of the project.

Therefore, structural, evidence-based approaches to reimagine the employment service system are needed. The reimagined system should ensure that all job seekers, including those with complex needs, receive the support they need to help them progress on the path to meaningful employment.

**Project vision:** System 2, BIT and PRF share a vision to create an **equitable employment services system**, where everyone is given the opportunity and support that they need to **access secure and meaningful employment**. This project aligns with PRF’s Employment strategic impact area, which not only aims to address unemployment itself, but also the deeper social and economic conditions that create systemic barriers to employment.

The project vision is underpinned by our commitment to:

- **Consult and co-design** with people with lived experience to build our understanding of the problem and develop solutions
- **Be guided by the evidence** to ensure that solutions are evidence-based, including insights from behavioural sciences
- **Develop solutions that are measurable** to ensure that pilots of new solutions are able to be evaluated, leveraging existing data sources where possible

The ultimate objective of this project is to develop **implementation and evaluation plans** for evidence-based and co-designed solutions. These plans will identify how the solutions could be piloted and evaluated to provide evidence and ultimately enable change in the system.

# Target cohorts for the project

This project focuses on two target cohorts: **young people and parents**, described below. Unemployment and the cycle of disadvantage can be intergenerational as an individual's worldview and aspirations are heavily influenced by their childhood. Therefore, there is a clear need to support young people to effectively transition from school to work, to ensure that they don't become disconnected from the system; and there is a need to support parents to obtain secure and meaningful work, to both access the benefits of employment and to be a positive influence for their children.



## Young people

15-24 year olds who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)\*



## Parents

Households with dependents under the age of 15 years where no persons are employed (single- or dual-carer families)

\* Note, while the term NEET does not strictly apply to young people, it is often implied that 'NEET' refers to 15-24 year olds. For the purposes of this project, the term NEETs is used exclusively for young NEETs aged 15-24 (unless otherwise specified).

# Project approach

**Applying behavioural insights:** We applied a behavioural insights (BI) lens to conduct research and design solutions to reimagine the employment services system. This involved applying findings from behavioural science to design and develop evidence-based solutions that create better alignment between behaviours and the contexts that they are performed in.

**Target cohorts:** Our project initially focused on young people (aged 15-24 who are not in education, employment or training) and parents (with dependents under the age of 15 years in households where no persons are employed). However, our research provided insight into the challenges and opportunities for improving employment services for job seekers with complex needs more broadly. Therefore, solutions have been developed to support all job seekers with complex needs.

| Phase      | 1. Rapid evidence review of the system   | 2. Exploratory research with target cohorts   | 3. Solution prototypes and implementation plans  |
|------------|--|---|--|
| Activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rapid scan of academic and grey literature</li><li>• Interviews with experts and stakeholders across the system</li></ul>                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In-depth job seeker interviews</li><li>• Fieldwork visits to gain deep insight into job seeker interactions with providers and other employment programs</li></ul>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Solution co-design workshops with job seekers, stakeholders and providers to generate possible solutions to reimagine the system</li></ul> |
| Goals      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Understand current challenges and opportunities</li><li>• Identify previous initiatives that have been developed to support our target cohorts</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Understand the needs of, and the behavioural barriers and enablers faced by, our target cohorts</li><li>• Identify potential leverage points for intervention</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop implementation and evaluation plans for two ideas to identify key solution elements and trial options</li></ul>                    |
| Reporting  | Findings are summarised in this report   | Findings are summarised in the Explore report   | Findings are summarised in the Solution prototypes and implementation plans report   |

# The current context: a pivotal opportunity for reform

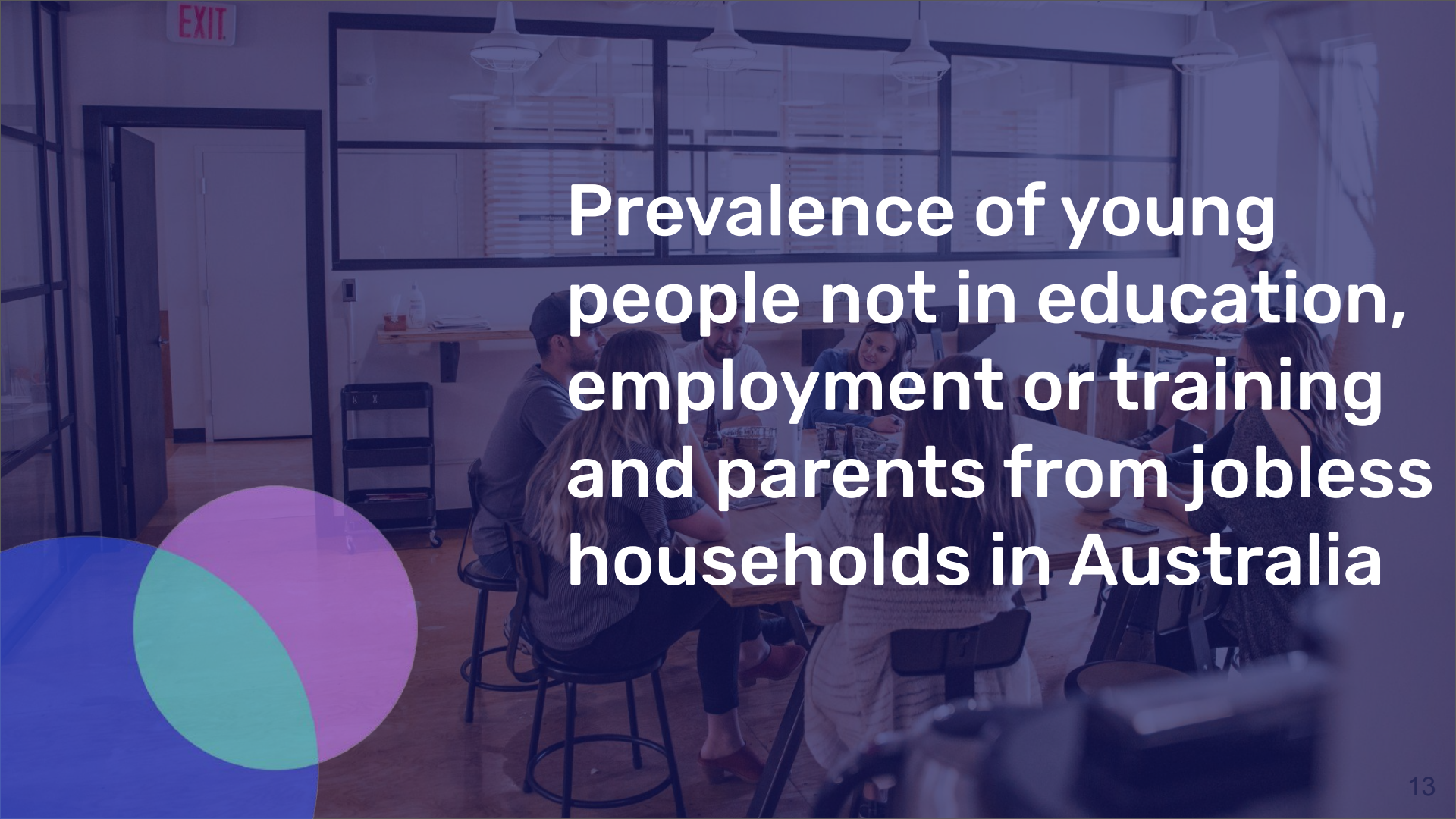
At the time of writing this report (in March and April of 2023), the House Select Committee into Workforce Australia Employment Services is conducting a first principles inquiry into system. The government is seeking input across the sector to understand the core issues about the system as a whole and to receive suggestions for opportunities for systemic change, rather than seeking input on a specific program.

The ParentsNext interim inquiry report, released on 28 February 2023, is **believed to be a signal for the types of feedback and recommendations that the government is open to considering. This gives us great hope that we are currently facing a pivotal moment in the history of employment services**, and that there is true buy-in and commitment from the government to truly understand the challenges, and to embrace opportunities for change, to ensure that the system is actually supporting job seekers in a meaningful way.

## Key findings and recommendations from the ParentsNext inquiry interim report ([Commonwealth of Australia, 2023](#))

The overarching finding of the recent review was that the current design and delivery of ParentsNext is punitive and does too much harm for the good it also does. Although the Committee emphasised that there is an essential requirement for a program to support vulnerable parents, the report outlined a number of criticisms of the program, including onerous compliance and participation requirements for participants, an undue focus on paid employment (especially given ParentsNext is a pre-employment program for parents with young children), a lack of co-design with experts and individuals with lived experience, competition between service providers, inappropriate payment structures and limited data sharing to support external evaluation of the program. In response to these criticisms, the Committee put forward 30 recommendations. Some key recommendations for ParentsNext that are highly aligned to key findings about the wider employment services system as summarised in this report include:

- Ensuring that the new program (the ParentsNext replacement) is **co-designed with key stakeholders and people with lived experience**, including representation from vulnerable groups, such as First Nations communities and people who are Culturally and Linguistically diverse
- The **removal of the Targeted Compliance Framework** (an automatic and punitive approach to ensuring participant compliance)
- In at least a few regions, resourcing and delivering ParentsNext via a **public sector agency**, rather than privatised service providers
- Ensuring that the new program has the **built-in capacity to trial, experiment and rigorously evaluate** alternative service delivery models



**Prevalence of young  
people not in education,  
employment or training  
and parents from jobless  
households in Australia**

# The rationale behind targeting young people and parents



A job is more than a source of income. For individuals, employment brings a range of benefits including financial security, social contact, social recognition, a sense of structure and sense of purpose (Kasy & Lehner, 2022). For countries, the employment rate is a key indicator of economic health. Helping people to find and stay in meaningful work, with appropriate wages and working conditions, is therefore imperative to create positive outcomes for individuals and societies.

Research shows that being Not in Education or Training (NEET) at any point in time significantly increases the risk of being NEET later in life. Being NEET can therefore lead to 'scarring' effects, which refers to long-term, potentially cumulative, negative impacts on future employment-, education-, or training-related outcomes (Ralston et al., 2022). **It is possible that scarring effects may be worse if people are NEET during their late teenage and early adult years, as opposed to later in life.** There are a number of potential reasons for this, including:

- If scarring effects start earlier in an individual's life, this means such effects have the potential to impact a larger proportion of their living years, and have more opportunity to snowball over time.
- The late teenage and early adulthood years may present a 'critical window' for someone to set their career journey on the right trajectory. Failure to enter the system during this critical window may be more detrimental than dropping out of the system later in their career journey.

**Therefore, it is critical to intervene early and break cycles of disadvantage before they start, and before scarring effects take hold.** Supporting young people to engage with employment, education and training is key to minimising their risk of unemployment later in life and ensuring that they have access to all the benefits of employment.

**To effectively tackle intergenerational disadvantage, it is also essential to support unemployed parents.** Evidence shows that in jobless households, poor employment outcomes are passed on from parents to their children once those children reach working age (Mooi-Reci et al., 2020). Unemployed parents often participate in mainstream Workforce Australia Services or the ParentsNext program. However, given the unique barriers that parents face (including childcare considerations), tailored support for parents of parents is a priority to enable positive outcomes for both parents and their children.

# Prevalence and economic impacts of being NEET

Individuals who are NEET are at greater risk of experiencing poor education, employment and wage outcomes later in life. The number of people who are NEET in Australia is significant, with **over a quarter of a million** (8.74%) of 15-24 year old Australians falling into this category (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a).

It is essential that young people aged 15-24 receive the support that they need in order to participate in education, employment or training, as evidence shows that periods of **being NEET throughout this critical period can lead to poorer outcomes that persist later in life**. Young people who are NEET for a minimum of 6 months can experience sustained negative impacts, **signalling a need for prevention and early intervention**.

## Key economic impacts of experiencing periods of being NEET during the ages of 15-24:

People who are NEET for **6+ consecutive months** (persistently NEET) between the **ages of 15-19**:

- **3-5x more likely to be persistently NEET** at least once between the ages of 20-24
- Less likely to be studying for, or to have attained, a **Certificate III or higher** qualification by age 24
- Less likely to be **employed** at age 24

Compared to peers with no history of being persistently NEET (Stanwick et al., 2017)

People who are NEET for **2+ consecutive years** at least once between the **ages of 15-24**:

- Experience **lower wages** later in life

Compared to peers with no history of being NEET (e61 institute, 2023).

# Prevalence and economic impacts for children growing up in a jobless family

Children from jobless families are at greater risk of experiencing poor employment and wage outcomes later in life. Over 200,000 (7.7%) of Australian families with children under 15 are jobless, meaning that approximately **408,500** children under 15 live in jobless households (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b).

Children from jobless households are more likely to grow up to become NEET and experience economic impacts later in life (including unemployment and lower wages). Providing meaningful and fit-for-purpose support to parents to help them on the path to employment may be effective in mitigating the risk of their children becoming NEET or unemployed, and therefore reduce the need for 'intervention' when these children grow up. **Supporting parents is therefore an important aspect of stopping the cycle of intergenerational unemployment.**

## Key economic impacts of growing up in a jobless household:

Among 17-35 year olds not currently in education or training, those who lived in a jobless household during childhood or adolescence are...

**more likely to be jobless** for at least three months between the ages of 17-35

...compared to peers who never lived in a jobless household (Mooi-Reci et al., 2020)

Among 19-33 year olds who are or have been employed during adulthood, those who lived in a jobless household during childhood or adolescence have...

**lower wages** between the ages of 19-33

...compared to peers who spent less or no time living in a jobless household (Curry et al., 2022)

## Potential reasons for poor outcomes for children:

**Resource deprivation:** Parents lack the money or connections to provide their children with necessities, or access to networking opportunities and learning spaces

**Negative role modelling:** Lack of employed role models means children are less likely to form positive attitudes toward the labour market, and more likely to imitate the jobless behaviour of their parents

**Family stress:** Financial adversity may produce emotional distress and relationship disharmony, which may lead to poorer educational performance and employment prospects for children

(Curry et al., 2022; Mooi-Reci et al., 2020)





# Risk factors and characteristics of young people and parents

# Risk factors for becoming NEET

There are a number of factors that increase the likelihood of being NEET, with national figures masking significant variations in risk. For ease, we have grouped these into *environmental*, *experiential* and personal *attribute* factors (see right).

You are approximately **5 times more likely** to be NEET at age 24, if you are from the **lowest socioeconomic status (SES) decile compared to the highest decile**: (Lamb et al., 2020):

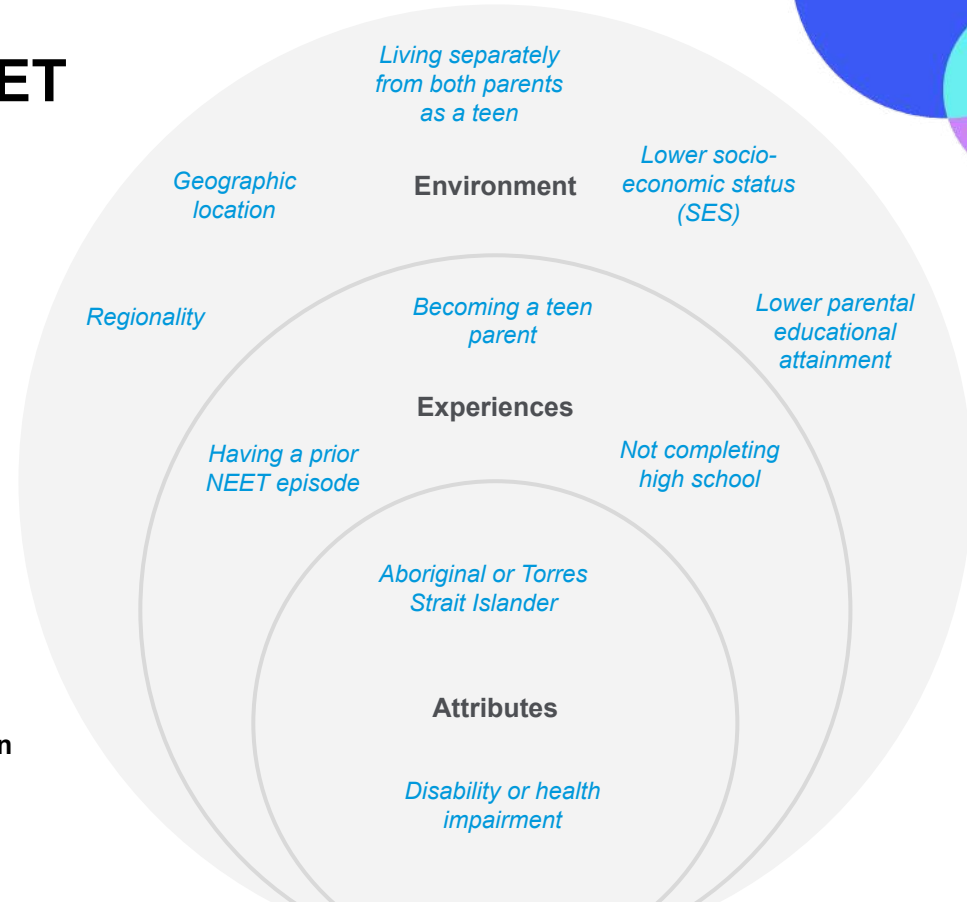
- 32.3% from the lowest SES decile
- Only 6.6% from the highest SES decile

You are **3 times more likely** to be NEET at age 24, if you are a **First Nations Australian compared to non-First Nation Australian** (Lamb et al., 2020):

- 45% of First Nations Australians
- Only 14% of non- First Nations Australians

You are **almost twice as likely** to be NEET at age 24 if you **live in a regional area**, and **3 times as likely** if you **live in very remote area**, compared to a major city (Lamb et al., 2020):

- 38.2% in very remote areas
- 20-23% in regional or remote areas
- Only 13.1% in major cities



Predictors of being NEET among Australians aged 15-24

e61 Institute (2023); Stanwick et al. (2017)

# Risk factors for living in a jobless household

There are a number of factors that increase the likelihood of living in a jobless household, with national figures masking significant variations in risk. For ease, we have grouped these into *environmental*, *experiential* and personal *attribute* factors (see right)\*.

There was less data about risk factors for living in a jobless household available compared to the information available about risk factors for being NEET.

## 69% of Australian jobless families with children under 15 are single parent families.

There are 144,300 Australian jobless *single parent* families with children under 15 (28.1% of all Australian single parent families with children under 15), and 64,100 Australian jobless *dual parent* families with children under 15 (just 2.9% of all Australian dual parent families with children under 15).

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022b)

\*The studies that were used to develop this visual included jobless households that do not have dependents as well as those with dependents. 'Having no children' would not be a relevant risk factor for jobless households with dependents.



## Predictors of living in a jobless household among Australians aged 15+

Scutella & Wooden (2004); Benevolent Society (2013)

# Challenges and opportunities in the employment services system

# Introduction

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We met with experts, academics, practitioners and policymakers to rapidly develop our understanding of the key challenges and opportunities within the employment services system. In total, we met with **27 experts** across a diverse range of backgrounds. It is clear that the people we spoke to have a deep and nuanced understanding of the employment services system. We are incredibly grateful for the experts' time, depth of insights and willingness to speak candidly with us about challenges and opportunities.

This report summarises the key insights from expert interviews, organised according to four overarching themes. The employment services system is complex, overlapping and highly interconnected. As such, while we have separated our insights according to four themes, many of the points in one section closely align to and depend on insights from another section.

**For the purposes of this report, interview insights have been grouped by seeing the challenges and opportunities through the 'eyes' of:**

- 1. Employment service providers**
- 2. Job seekers (individuals with lived experience)**
- 3. Employers**
- 4. System as a whole**

## **Balance of insights:**

Insights obtained from expert interviews focused more heavily on service providers, job seekers and the system as a whole, and therefore we found less insights regarding employers. However, this is a finding in and of itself, as it reinforces how disconnected employers truly are from the employment services system.

Further, many experts discussed challenges and opportunities within the employment services system in general, or insights that were specific to young people. On balance, there were less insights specifically for parents. It is our understanding that this may be reflective of the fact that there is little, if any, policy focus on parents. While both young people and parents may be serviced by mainstream employment services (and therefore, challenges with mainstream services are relevant for our two cohorts), understanding the specific needs and barriers for young people and parents within the current context will be a critical aspect of the upcoming exploratory research that we will conduct as part of the next phase of this project.

# Expert interview participants

We conducted semi-structured interviews with **27 experts** to develop our understanding the challenges in the employment services system, opportunities for change and domestic or international approaches that have been developed to better support young people and parents.

| #  | Name and affiliation  |
|----|---|
| 1  | <b>Alison Inglis</b> - Department of Employment and Workplace Relations |
| 2  | <b>Andrew Shaw</b> - Department of Employment and Workplace Relations   |
| 3  | <b>Anna Ritson</b> - Department of Employment and Workplace Relations   |
| 4  | <b>Annette Gill</b> - National Employment Services Association          |
| 5  | <b>Angharad Lubbock</b> - White Box Enterprises                         |
| 6  | <b>Barry Sandison</b> - Australian National University                  |
| 7  | <b>Bruce Cunningham</b> - Dept. of Employment and Workplace Relations   |
| 8  | <b>Jan Kruger</b> - Imagine More  |
| 9  | <b>Dr Jeff Borland</b> - University of Melbourne (UoM)                  |
| 10 | <b>Jim Stanford</b> - Future Work Australia                             |
| 11 | <b>Joanne Anderson</b> - Dept. of Employment and Workplace Relations    |
| 12 | <b>Josephine Auer</b> - e61   |
| 13 | <b>Kate Munro</b> - Youth Action  |
| 14 | <b>Kristin O'Connell</b> - Antipoverty Centre                           |

| #  | Name and affiliation   |
|----|--|
| 15 | <b>Lisa Fowkes</b> - Social Ventures Australia (SVA)                           |
| 16 | <b>Lukas Lehner</b> - University of Oxford                                     |
| 17 | <b>Prof. Mark Wooden</b> - University of Melbourne (UoM)                       |
| 18 | <b>Prof. Max Kasy</b> - University of Oxford                                   |
| 19 | <b>May Lam</b> - Per Capita  |
| 20 | <b>Meg Price</b> - Give Where You Live foundation                              |
| 21 | <b>Prof. Michele Belot</b> - Cornell University                                |
| 22 | <b>Nick Gruen</b> - Lateral Economics  |
| 23 | <b>Ruth Hunt</b> - Department of Employment and Workplace Relations            |
| 24 | <b>Sally Sinclair</b> - National Employment Services Association               |
| 25 | <b>Shane Johnson</b> - Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian government |
| 26 | <b>Shelley Mallett</b> - Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL)                      |
| 27 | <b>Prof. Siobhan O'Sullivan</b> - University of New South Wales (UNSW)         |

# Summary of relevant behavioural concepts

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We have complemented interview insights with key concepts from the behavioural science literature. By understanding the key behavioural elements at play, we can design solutions that are aligned with how people actually behave and make decisions in the real world. Throughout this section, behavioural science concepts are indicated in ***bold, italic text***. These concepts are defined below, and discussed further in-context throughout the report.

## Definitions of key behavioural concepts discussed in this section:

- **Sludge**: The accumulation of daily frictions that inhibit people from doing the things that can make their lives easier or better
- **Incentives**: Something that motivates a person to take a particular action. Incentives may be financial (for example, receiving a payment upon the completion of a particular behaviour or outcome) or non-financial (which could include praise, or a better 'rating' of a service).
- **Scarcity mindset**: People have finite cognitive resources or 'mental bandwidth', which consists of attention, cognition and self-control. These resources can be depleted or reduced over time as they are used up by any sort of mental effort (including processing information, thinking about the future, or worrying). The scarcity mindset tends to occur when people feel that they don't have enough of something, such as people who have lots of things to worry about, and therefore have less resources for day-to-day decision making or activities.
- **Relational aspects**: Refers to key elements of human interaction and relationships which can facilitate trust, including fairness, justice and reciprocity.
- **Present bias**: A cognitive bias where people tend to prioritise short-term rewards and immediate gratification over long-term goals and benefits.
- **Risk aversion**: A common behavioural trait that influences decision-making, where people exhibit a preference for certainty over uncertainty or, more specifically, a preference for avoiding risk or uncertainty.
- **Unconscious bias**: Biases and automatic stereotypes that exist outside of an individual's conscious awareness. These biases can influence an individual's perception, attitudes, and behaviours towards other people or groups, based on factors such as race, gender, age or socioeconomic status, often leading to unfair or discriminatory treatment.
- **Shrouded markets**: Markets where there is limited access to important information about the quality and value of goods and services, making it difficult for all actors to make well-informed decisions.
- **Feedback loops**: A cycle of cause-and-effect interactions, where the output or result of one action or event feeds back into the system as input, influencing future actions or events.



## Overview of key themes

This section provides a high-level introduction to the four categories which have been used to structure insights about challenges and opportunities. Each summary slide also includes a brief description of key relevant behavioural science concepts (indicated in **bold**, *italic text*).



# Overview: Challenges and solutions through the eyes of the providers

Employment service providers operate within a set of structures, incentives and practices that don't serve the needs of young people or parents.

Australia has a unique employment services market structure. The complete privatisation of employment services, alongside the overlapping and disjoint provision of programs between federal, state and local governments, has created a **fragmented market with high levels of competition between providers that hinders collaboration**. Service provider *incentives* often focus on the volume of "pure" employment outcomes, rather than other measures of human capability development. Human capability measures are important precursors to obtaining and retaining a secure and meaningful job, especially for vulnerable groups.

The focus on provider compliance and the highly prescriptive approach to outcome payments leaves providers preoccupied with administrative requirements, which **squeezes out time for the relational aspects of supporting job seekers**. The system is **riddled with what behavioural scientists call 'sludge'**: cumbersome reporting requirements, long forms to fill out and complex websites to navigate, with providers forced to enter the same types of compliance information time and again. Most of this sludge is hidden, and is not deliberate, but has built up over time due to successive changes to regulation and procurement. **This sludge is not only frustrating, but it is a hugely underweighted economic burden on the system**, while also eroding trust and diverting focus away from actually supporting disadvantaged job seekers into work. Finally, the administrative burdens on service providers has changed the shape of the case manager workforce, and many job agents are now poorly trained and poorly paid, with **limited time, capability or incentive to meaningfully support job seekers facing complex barriers** to employment, including many young people and parents.

This report summarises the key insights regarding challenges and solutions for service providers along the following four themes:

- 1.1** The government's approach to employment services contract management hinders the ability for service providers to deliver quality, effective services and to collaborate with each other
- 1.2** Providers are primarily paid based on performance outcomes, and the blunt tools used to measure success discourage providers from investing in job seekers with complex needs
- 1.3** The burden of administrative requirements squeezes out the time and opportunity for service providers to focus on the relational aspects of supporting job seekers
- 1.4** The provider workforce is often poorly trained and poorly paid, with many job agents lacking the experience, skills and tools to be able to effectively support job seekers with complex needs

# Overview: Challenges and solutions through the eyes of the job seekers

The current system takes a highly individualised approach, which is focused on narrow employment outcomes

Humans are deeply social creatures, with a strong sense of connectedness, fairness and reciprocity. When these *relational aspects* are met, trust and deep relationships can flourish; when these aspects are absent, it can critically undermine trust and engagement.

The employment services system fails to tap into the power and importance of the relational aspects of supporting job seekers. The overwhelming focus on compliance during meetings with service providers and the potential for **punitive outcomes hinders the ability for job seekers to establish rapport with and trust in their job agents**. Further, Mutual Obligation Requirements (MORs) are often **deficit-based**, focusing on job seekers' barriers that must be 'fixed' in order for them to obtain mainstream employment, hindering self-efficacy. The often generic approach to MORs fails to take into account that job seekers with complex barriers may have more pressing needs that they require support with (such as mental health challenges or housing issues). Taken together, these factors **erode job seeker trust in the system**.

Completing compulsory activities and navigating the fragmented employment system and compliance requirements is often confusing and time-consuming for job seekers, **using up precious 'mental bandwidth'**. Combined with managing the financial stressors and tradeoffs that young people and parents often manage on a daily basis, this complexity accentuates what behavioural scientists have identified as *'scarcity'* effects. Studies have shown this can lead to a vicious cycle of reduced self-control and efficacy, further inhibiting their ability to find work.

This report summarises the key insights regarding challenges and solutions for service providers along the following five themes:

- 2.1** Mutual Obligation Requirements (MORs) reinforce the onus on the job seeker as an individual who needs to be 'activated' and prove compliance
- 2.2** The strict focus on mutual obligations, and service provider staff turnover, erodes job seeker trust in the system
- 2.3** The current system fails to tap into the power of relationships and social networks
- 2.4** The focus on rudimentary employment outcomes can individualise a systemic issue and fail to recognise the impact of non-vocational barriers to employment
- 2.5** The fragmented system is difficult for individuals to navigate, exacerbated by overlapping programs, multiple points of entry and different eligibility requirements

# Overview: Challenges and solutions through the eyes of the employers

Employers are a critical actor in the employment services system, but they are generally disconnected and disengaged from it

Employment services systems and policies around the world tend to address unemployment through supply side approaches that focus on supporting job seekers to obtain work. Less attention has been paid to the demand side of the market and the critical role that employers play in providing secure, meaningful work opportunities, especially for disadvantaged job seekers.

Service providers' focus on the volume of job applications and placements, rather than ensuring quality and person-job fit for candidates they refer, has **eroded employers' perceptions of service providers and the job seekers they work with**. As a result, most employers are now completely disconnected from the employment services system. Employer perceptions about job seekers referred by service providers, and decisions to not recruit them, may be influenced by **unconscious bias**. For example, although wage subsidies are intended to incentivise employers to recruit disadvantaged job seekers, such incentives may inadvertently send negative signals about the 'quality' of such candidates, and so, perversely, they may actually discourage employers from recruiting the job seekers the incentives are intended to support.

Employers and HR professionals are often under pressure to fill roles quickly, and prefer to recruit individuals with experience and existing skills. This preference reflects employers' **present bias** and **risk aversion**, as employers prefer to recruit experienced and job-ready candidates, rather than investing in training and development for job seekers with less experience. As a result, employers tend to rely on existing systems or hiring techniques that are perceived to reduce their risks (for example, by screening for tertiary qualifications and recent work experience), **creating a 'free-rider' problem and systematically disadvantaging job seekers with more complex needs**.

This report summarises the key insights regarding challenges and solutions for service providers along the following two themes:

**3.1** Very few employers engage with service providers, and many hold negative stereotypes about the job seekers referred by providers

**3.2** Employers strongly prefer to recruit individuals who are job ready and experienced, and the lack of investment in upskilling job seekers is contributing to a shrinking talent pool available to address chronic skill shortages

# Overview: Challenges and solutions through the eyes of the **system**

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There is a severe lack of understanding about what works, for who and why, hindering effective feedback loops within the system.

Given the significant spend on employment services, **we know surprisingly little about what actually works to help people secure meaningful employment** in general, let alone what works for young people and parents specifically. Consequently, the system displays the characteristics of a '**shrouded market**'; as finding critical pieces of information is difficult for all actors. This means that the government does not have adequate information to commission employment services effectively; service providers have limited intel on what really works to support job seekers; and job seekers have limited information to shape their choices about programs or service providers to engage with.

Critically, **we need to enable a 'learning system'**, which is based on continuous improvement and ensures that employment services *actually* support people to find meaningful and sustained work. To do so, we need to redefine measures of success to include wider **measures of human capability** and more routinely collect **job seeker feedback**. These data points should not remain static, rather, they should provide dynamic and personalised inputs into **feedback loops** that create positive change. Finally, people with lived experience should not only provide feedback on employment policies, programs and providers, but they should play much more prominent roles in co-designing and managing them, ensuring that services are built around the needs of the people they are ultimately designed to support.

This report summarises the key insights regarding challenges and solutions for service providers along the following four themes:

- 4.1 There is little robust evidence of what works; system actors need mechanisms to test, measure, share learnings and scale-up effective policies and programs
- 4.2 Tools used to measure success of services are blunt; better measures (including job seeker feedback and human capability measures) are needed
- 4.3 Policies, programs and services have been developed in a predominantly top-down approach, with little meaningful co-design with people with lived experience
- 4.4 There is an absence of nuanced, personalised data to inform targeted approaches to support job seekers



## **Detailed summary of key insights**

This section summarises key findings aligned to four themes. Selected illustrative quotes and examples have been incorporated where appropriate.

# Employment service providers operate within a set of structures, incentives and practices that don't serve the needs of young people or parents (1 of 4)

## 1.1 The government's approach to employment services contract management hinders the ability for service providers to deliver quality, effective services and to collaborate with each other

Incentives are powerful drivers of behaviour. In employment services, the government's use of incentives and approach to contract management drives a suite of provider behaviours. Two key elements are: the major procurement processes (which typically occurs every seven years) and caseload redistribution between providers (usually occurring more regularly, approximately every 18 months) (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Service providers are heavily incentivised to focus on meeting these government requirements and performance measures in order to secure government contracts and maximise their caseload allocation. This is vital for the financial viability of their organisations, and higher caseload numbers represent greater opportunities to obtain performance payments (further discussed on the [next slide](#)). However, the measures of service provider performance are bluntly designed and implemented. The measures skew providers' focus towards: 1) volume of job seeker employment outcomes (i.e. the number of job seekers on a provider's caseload that obtain 12 and 26 week outcomes), rather than the quality and sustainability of the outcomes, and; 2) provider compliance with job seeker monitoring (including ensuring job seekers meet their MORs, and applying sanctions when they do not), which significantly hinders the relationship with job seekers, as discussed [later](#) in this report.

Provider performance measures are used to inform decisions during the major procurement process. While this is sensible in theory, the use of simplistic measures used to assess performance means that such decisions can have negative consequences, and create a significant level of disruption. As an example, 80% of providers across the 51 employment regions were reported to have lost their local contracts in the most recent procurement round (in June 2022), and "just 17% of providers were providing the same contract in the same region compared to 2016" (Sally Sinclair, NESAs, quoted in Marin-Guzman, 2022). This level of disruption severely impacts the ability for service providers to develop deep local networks and build trust with job seekers, which is a critical component of success, particularly for young people.

Further, the regular caseload reallocation process creates a competitive culture between providers, severely restricting innovation and collaboration. Innovation is hindered as service providers strive to outperform other providers delivering the same services, rather than trialling new approaches which may be more effective, but which may risk negative outcomes during the procurement or contract reallocation process (Considine et al., 2020). Collaboration among service providers is critical to ensuring that knowledge and expertise of effective approaches is shared across the sector, enabling service providers in other regions to trial such approaches and create better outcomes for the job seekers they support. Collaboration is also required to create effective feedback loops (discussed [later](#) in this report).

*"As well as being administratively burdensome, it [the performance and quality framework] doesn't contribute to improvement and better strategies... the focus is on administration and removing poor performing providers, rather than improving performance overall" - Annette Gill, NESAs*

*"Many other State government, skills, and community programs contribute to employment outcomes for people on Workforce Australia caseloads...though providers have no incentive to point out or attribute successful employment outcomes to those other programs." (Per Capita, 2023)*

# Employment service providers operate within a set of structures, incentives and practices that don't serve the needs of young people or parents (2 of 4)

## 1.2 Providers are primarily paid based on performance outcomes, and the blunt tools used to measure success discourage providers from investing in job seekers with complex needs

Through various reforms of the employment services system, the government has focused on Payment-by-Results as a way to maintain quality and control. Performance payments comprise a significant proportion of service provider revenue – for example, more than half of total provider payments in the jobactive model (2015-22) were dependent on achieving predetermined, typically employment, outcomes (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). In theory, this model should be effective in ensuring that service providers focus on *outcomes* and create an effective system. The issue with the current approach is that the intense focus on employment outcomes encourages service providers to “cream and park” job seekers (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). The practice of creaming and parking occurs when service providers prioritise or “cream” job seekers who are the most job ready (and who would require little investment in order to achieve the employment outcome) and deprioritise or “park” job seekers who have complex barriers to employment (and who would therefore require significant investment of time and resources before the employment outcome is achieved). Therefore, young people and parents that face complex non-vocational barriers to employment (including housing, transport, mental health issues, disability and childcare support), despite actually needing help and support in order to move toward employment, are often “parked” as a result of the service provider incentives.

The current Payment-by-Results model can also undermine service quality. When service providers do work with job seekers to help them obtain employment, the focus is predominantly on the volume and speed of the placement, rather than the quality of the job (including job security, pay, progression opportunities or alignment with the individual's skills and preferences). Additionally, this model means that service providers operate with a high degree of financial risk, as the viability of their organisation is dependent on performance payments which are not guaranteed. Some providers respond to this risk by reducing staff numbers and qualifications (Considine et al., 2020) as a cost-cutting measure, further comprising service quality and creating a workforce that is less capable of supporting job seekers, especially those with complex needs (as discussed [further](#) in this report).

Elements of the new Workforce Australia system signal that the government is trialling ways to incentivise service providers to support job seekers with complex needs. For example, the digital-first approach of the new system means that the most job ready job seekers will self-manage online, so service providers are working almost exclusively with individuals with more complex needs. However, we can expect that there will still be a spectrum of job readiness among a provider's current caseload, and the creaming and parking may continue among this new cohort. Another change is a new \$750 ‘progress payment’, which is payable to providers who help address job seekers’ vocational and non-vocational barriers. However, given the complexity and diversity of barriers that job seekers may face, a \$750 payment claimable only once every 24 months, is likely an insufficient sum to enable, or incentivise, providers to help people overcome these complex challenges.

*“If you were able to develop a system where someone or something wasn't having to tender or make a profit were in the mix, then you would have a better chance of having a system more inclined to help heavily disadvantaged people into work. But you might end up with a system without a huge incentive to help people into work”*  
- Dr Siobhan O'Sullivan, UNSW

# Employment service providers operate within a set of structures, incentives and practices that don't serve the needs of young people or parents (3 of 4)

## 1.3 The burden of administrative requirements squeezes out the time and opportunity for service providers to focus on the relational aspects of supporting job seekers

Job agents spend a significant portion of their meeting time with job seekers on attending to administrative processes. Studies suggest that staff spend around a third (34.6%) of their time completing administrative and compliance tasks (Considine et al., 2020: cited in Ingold et al., 2023). We heard from NESAs that there is an alignment among service providers that the administrative burdens, driven by the performance and quality framework, is “a key issue that is preventing innovation, genuinely tailored service delivery” and the reduction of administration is a top priority to ensure service providers have capacity to deliver efficient and effective services (Annette Gill, interview). The burden of administrative requirements squeezes out the time available to service providers for building trust with job seekers, which is critical to effectively provide support, especially for young people (discussed [later](#) in this report).

In addition to reducing the time available during meetings with job seekers, the stringent compliance requirements and fear of auditing or consequences can also impact job agents' opportunity to creatively and flexibly support job seekers. “Misuses of administrative discretion by job agents and providers show up as ‘red flags’ in the computerised system [the ESS Web]” which has been referred to as a ‘virtual panopticon’ given its role in service provider compliance monitoring. The fear of auditing and ‘red flags’ puts “pressure on frontline staff to follow procedural guidelines, such as minimum job-search conditionality requirements, to the letter” (O’Sullivan et al., 2021). However, job agents do have *some* flexibility, as the day-to-day interactions between job agents and job seekers can deviate from what is documented in official policy and guidelines. For example, job agents may not always report when a job seeker turns down a ‘reasonable’ offer of employment, or may encourage their clients to obtain medical certificates to enable a medical exemption from their MORs (a number of examples are noted in O’Sullivan et al., 2021). The notion that job agents need to ‘bend’ the rules in order to show compassion to their clients was echoed in an interview with Kristin O’Connell, who reflected on findings from a recent survey conducted by the Antipoverty Centre that, “when people had a good experience, it’s because their caseworker broke the rules.”

We heard that there is greater flexibility when delivering Transition to Work (TtW) compared to mainstream Workforce Australia services (see [Appendix 1](#) for a summary of programs). This is the intent of the TtW model, which includes larger upfront payments to providers that support smaller caseloads, participants' MORs being fully met through their participation in TtW and the ability of participants to opt out of the service (back to mainstream services) which requires providers to work harder to meet participants' needs (Alison Inglis, interview).

*Provider monitoring is “not just about [job placement] numbers and outcomes... providers are scrutinised in terms of all the little things that they do, and every time they move outside the norm, they come under greater scrutiny, even if it's good behaviour” - Annette Gill, NESAZ*

*“Providers are forced to spend a disproportionate time undertaking administrative work to meet contract conditions, maintain their licence to operate, and meet the conditions of claiming fees, ensuring a job seeker’s attendance at the first appointment, getting a signed Job Plan, monitoring and reporting attendance and progress against the Job Plan, and keeping records updated” (Per Capita, 2023)*



# Employment service providers operate within a set of structures, incentives and practices that don't serve the needs of young people or parents (4 of 4)

## 1.4 The provider workforce is often poorly trained and poorly paid, with many job agents lacking the experience, skills and tools to be able to effectively support job seekers with complex needs

Over time, as the compliance requirements of service providers have increased, the day-to-day reality of case management has shifted to be predominantly focused on administrative tasks such as documentation, data entry and job seeker monitoring. In addition, the composition of the service provider workforce has changed. Initially, individuals who worked as case managers [job agents] were more likely to come from 'caring' backgrounds, such as a teaching or nursing background (Lisa Fowkes, interview). Now, the workforce is predominantly low-paid, low-skill labour, as service providers "have few incentives to forgo low-wage workers in favour of hiring professionals" (Soss et al, 2011, p. 242: cited in O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

Service provider decisions to cut costs by offering minimal pay and training to job agents impacts satisfaction and staff turnover, eroding the quality of the service job seekers receive. A survey of service provider frontline staff found that only half of respondents were satisfied with their present working conditions, including pay, hours and opportunities for promotion (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). The Australian Unemployed Workers' Union (AUWU) also noted that, "due to the lack of adequate training provided, some [job agents] cannot communicate well with people facing significant barriers to work and often adopt an attitude of blaming unemployed workers for their own unemployment. Others feel frustration with their organisations who engage in dubious business practices requiring them to act in ways contrary to their own personal value systems" (AUWU, 2018). The low pay, minimal training and the focus on monitoring job seekers are likely core factors underpinning the high rates of turnover among staff, which are three times the Australian average (ranging from 30-42%) (O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

The lack of access to effective tools to advise job seekers further restricts job agents' ability to provide effective support. Job agents can find it "impossible to aggregate and analyse the profile of skills, experience, job interests of all people on the caseload, to see what advice, training, and supports a particular group of job seekers might need" (Per Capita, 2023).

Current tools skew heavily toward supporting individual job seekers in their job search (for example, tools such as [Job Switch](#), [Find a Job](#) or [Your Career](#)), with limited, if any, tools to enable job agents to effectively support job seekers.

These factors – a low-skilled, unsatisfied and turbulent workforce – coalesce to further reduce the ability for service providers to effectively support job seekers, especially young people and parents who have unique support needs, and chip away at job seeker trust in the system as whole.

*"You can't professionalise this industry unless you change the work itself so it aligns with those types of [professional] models, being client-centred, respecting rights, agency and autonomy over and above [compliance]" - Lisa Fowkes, SVA*

**Innovative tools to match job seekers and jobs could be used by service providers.** A randomised controlled trial (RCT) by [Belot et al. \(2019\)](#) tested a digital tool that uses a national database of occupational characteristics to provide tailored advice to job seekers conveniently and cheaply – at just the click of a button. The tool helps job seekers to identify occupations that fit their interests and skills, and to locate jobs within these occupations in their local area. The RCT showed that the tool successfully increased the breadth of job search, breadth of job applications and number of job interviews, especially among those who initially searched too narrowly.

# The current system takes a highly individualised approach, which is focused on narrow employment outcomes (1 of 5)

## 2.1 Mutual obligation requirements reinforce the onus on the job seeker as an individual who needs to be 'activated' and prove compliance

Mutual Obligation Requirements (MORs) are a core element of Australia's employment services system. MORs are the activities detailed in a job seeker's Job Plan, which an individual must complete and report on each month in order to receive their income support payment. The types of activities typically included in a Job Plan include a minimum number of job applications to be submitted each month, completion of pre-approved training courses (often to support job applications, such as resume writing courses) and the requirement to accept any 'reasonable' offer of employment. These activities all signal a belief that the key barrier hindering job seekers from obtaining employment is a lack of "motivation" to apply for, and participate in, work. MORs are built on a premise that job seekers need to be incentivised (i.e. 'activated') to undertake job search activities, and therefore policies mainly focus on "motivating employment and penalising welfare dependence" (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). As a result, job seeker payments are conditional upon their compliance with meeting MORs. Rather than receiving payments due to their personal circumstance and need, employment payments are paid only to those who "prove their worth [by proving compliance with MORs], and in the process earn their benefits and services" (Ramia & Carney 2001, p. 63: cited in O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

Conditionality creates a number of challenges in the employment services system. Firstly, while conditionality may be effective in motivating job seekers to comply with MORs, such activities may not actually be making a meaningful difference in supporting job seekers to achieve stable, meaningful employment. Some of the mandatory activities (such as Work for the Dole) have been criticised as being more beneficial from a bureaucratic and contractual perspective, than benefiting the job seekers themselves (see O'Sullivan et al., 2021). However, given the need to meet MORs to avoid payment suspensions, job seekers often complete the mandatory activities, regardless of how beneficial they are to finding work. This means that job seekers' time and effort is being redirected away from activities that could actually help on the path toward employment, in order to meet generic mandatory activities and receive their employment support payment.

The inefficient use of job seekers' time and resources is particularly damaging for job seekers with complex barriers to employment, including young people and parents. These individuals already have limited mental bandwidth available, due to the financial and wellbeing impacts associated with unemployment, reinforcing a 'scarcity mindset' that further inhibits their ability to find work.

*MORs are "entirely premised on the idea that 'people don't want to do anything'. We saw in 2020 when there was a removal of MORs, the long-term unemployed were better placed to look for work and had enough energy to do work" - Kristin O'Connell, Antipoverty Centre*

*MORs should "recognise and respect the circumstances of each individual" (Per Capita, 2023)*

### **Some jurisdictions are removing conditionality for specific cohorts.**

Between July 2022 - June 2023, the Welsh government is piloting a Basic Income for Care Leavers in Wales (see [Welsh Government, 2023](#)), a pilot valued at £20m. The program targets 18 year olds who are leaving care (approx. 500 people), with a basic income of £1,280 per month after tax for a period of 24 months. The program is voluntary and the payments are unconditional (there are no mutual obligation requirements), universal (the payment is the same for every eligible person) and cash-based (there are no restrictions on the use of the payment). Recipients also receive "broader information and support" to help them navigate the world outside of care.

# The current system takes a highly individualised approach, which is focused on narrow employment outcomes (2 of 5)

## 2.2 The strict focus on mutual obligations, and service provider staff turnover, erodes job seeker trust in the system

[As previously mentioned](#), the burden of administrative requirements squeezes out the time and opportunity for service providers to focus on the relational aspects of supporting job seekers. Even small signals in body language, including turning away from the job seeker to face the computer, or looking at the screen rather than making frequent eye contact, can impact the relationship with job seekers (Annette Gill, interview). These signals appear to be highly commonplace, with a 2016 survey finding that 93% of job agents are “working on their computers most, if not all, of the time” when meeting job seekers (Lewis et al., 2016: cited in O’Sullivan et al., 2021). The use of computers seem to “underline the transactional nature of the meetings” (O’Sullivan et al., 2021).

From the outset, the power imbalance between service providers and job seekers is highlighted by the potential for punitive outcomes (i.e. reducing or withholding payments) if job seekers do not comply with their MORs or if they fail to turn up for appointments with their job agents. Young people likely experience a greater power imbalance between themselves and service providers due to their young age. Further, some job seekers believe the mandatory activities listed on their Job Plan are trivial. For example, mandating ParentsNext participants to attend activities such as storytime and playgroup received significant negative media attention recently (see [Henriques-Gomes, 2023](#)), as participants can face payment suspensions for non-attendance, significantly impacting their livelihoods, especially for the 75% of participants who are single parents (who would likely be classified as a jobless family). The need to meet MORs to avoid payment suspensions can cause significant anxiety among job seekers (as noted in the ParentsNext Inquiry Interim Report; see Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). This point was reinforced by Kristin O’Connell from the Antipoverty Centre who reflected that there is no ‘good’ way to structure MORs, as it creates a situation where you have “the government versus an individual who will starve if they don’t do what the government wants” (interview).

*“Because Job Plans contain the conditions under which you receive income support, they require a level of technicality, documentation and specificity that means that a lot of the relationship between service providers and the individual focuses on that” - Lisa Fowkes, Social Ventures Australia*

*“You can have the best technically-designed employment services program, but if you have a culture where people don’t trust it due to fraught relationships, then the system means nothing.” - Dr Jeff Borland, UoM*

The lack of investment in building rapport, the threat of punitive outcomes and job seeker scepticism about some of the activities listed on their Job Plans all compound to erode the potential for trusting relationships between job seekers and their job agents. Although it is not impossible, and some job agents do “bend” the rules in order to demonstrate compassion with job seekers, it has been noted that “In general, people are churned through what is experienced as an indifferent system, with ‘personalised service’ being the exception, rather than the norm.” (Marston & McDonald, 2008, p. 265: cited in O’Sullivan et al., 2021).

**An alternative approach to generic, compliance-focused MORs is co-designed, mutual accountability ‘deals’.** One of the core elements of the Transition to Work Community of Practice (TtW CoP) model proposed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) is “the Deal”. The Deal is co-designed between job seekers and staff, and includes activities for *both* job seekers *and* the staff, to facilitate joint accountability and reciprocity. As noted by Shelley Mallett from BSL, “Although the entanglement [of MORs] with job seeker support [payments] is counterproductive... we are not averse to light-touch accountability..., otherwise you don’t communicate that they have value because you hold no expectation.” See [case studies](#) for more detail.

# The current system takes a highly individualised approach, which is focused on narrow employment outcomes (3 of 5)

## 2.3 The current system fails to tap into the power of relationships and social networks

The system takes a highly individualistic approach to supporting job seekers, failing to harness the power of relationships and social networks when delivering employment services. Service providers work with job seekers on a case-by-case basis, engaging almost exclusively with the job seeker alone. However, social networks are incredibly important to understand and influence individual behaviour. This is especially true for young people who are highly influenced by their peers and the worldview that was established during their childhood (including their attitudes toward study and employment, and ideas about what is achievable for them). Social networks are also important for parents, as the individuals within a family unit influence each other and often face similar challenges on their path to employment. It is important to recognise the significant social influence that parents have over their children and therefore the employment outcomes of their children, as research shows that people aged 17-35 who spent several years in a jobless household during childhood or adolescence are more likely to be jobless for at least three months (Mooli-Reci et al., 2020).

There are some examples of organisations tapping into the power of networks to deliver enhanced outcomes for job seekers. Back in the early 2010s, the government funded a number of holistic services to parents, including Family Centred Employment Projects (Benevolent Society, 2013), however publicly available information about these pilots, including evaluation and how service providers adopted a family-centred approach, was scarce. Another example is

Imagine More, a nonprofit that works with people with a disability, including young people (see box, right). Imagine More encourages families to tap into their social networks that know the person well to develop a plan for customised employment as “people around you often notice strengths, interests and possible career paths, that you may not be able to identify on your own” (Jan Kruger, interview).

Effective service providers and other organisations supporting job seekers often establish deep relationships with local services and employers, especially if they are working with disadvantaged job seekers such as young people and parents. This is one of the reasons that there is only one TtW provider per region. Deep relationships enable service providers to effectively refer job seekers to services for support with non-vocational barriers, to training opportunities or to specific roles with local employers; and can enhance job seeker trust in the service providers. However, turnover in providers (such as the disruption caused by the procurement process in 2022 where 80% of providers lost their local contracts) can severely disrupt local relationships and undermine the quality of service provided to job seekers.

*“The system is very individual, [there is] no priority for family-based interventions... There have been some really good [family-centred] pilots over the years... but none of the takeouts were ever adopted into mainstream services” - Annette Gill, NESAs*

**A strengths-based approach which taps into job seekers' social networks can be effective in lifting individuals' career aspirations.** For example, when working with young people, Imagine More conducts a Discovery Process, which includes inputs from that person's social networks (families, friends and other community members, such as teachers or sports coaches) to understand their interests, preferences and strengths to develop a personalised support plan. Imagine More encourages families to surround themselves with people who “need to believe that this person can find work” so the individual can believe it themselves (Jan Kruger, interview). Imagine More also use these networks to facilitate soft and personalised introductions to potential employers (see the [case studies](#) section for more information).

# The current system takes a highly individualised approach, which is focused on narrow employment outcomes (4 of 5)

## 2.4 The focus on rudimentary employment outcomes can individualise a systemic issue and fail to recognise the impact of non-vocational barriers to employment

A fundamental challenge of the current system is the fact service providers focus predominantly on *employment* outcomes (or proximal outcomes, such as training), while addressing non-vocational barriers to employment is deprioritised. However, in the same way that the benefits of employment are broader than the financial security of having a job, the challenges of obtaining a job can be much broader than the technical skills required to apply for work, or the motivation to do so. For job seekers with complex barriers to employment, there is a need to address more pressing needs, which often don't fit neatly within the remit of an 'employment' service. A recent report found that the most common reasons young people cite for their disengagement in the employment, education and training system are, in order of prevalence: health or disability constraints; market constraints (e.g. lack of available jobs; unsuitable work hours; discrimination); skill or qualification constraints, and; caring/domestic constraints (e61 Institute, 2023). Many of these reasons would not be appropriately addressed with job search activities or other pre-approved activities such as Work for the Dole. Service providers' focus on vocational activities individualises a systemic issue, by ignoring the structural barriers that job seekers face to employment, and emphasising the onus on individuals to be motivated and active in their search for work. This is rarely an effective approach, especially for those furthest from the labour market, such as young people and parents.

There are a range of policy and program approaches to respond to the issue of non-vocational barriers to employment. Two key approaches discussed in our expert interviews include the provision of wraparound services or the delivery of targeted job guarantees. **Wraparound services** (further discussed on the [next slide](#)) see the job seeker as a 'whole person', rather than trying to separate out vocational and non-vocational barriers, or trying to deliver services purely focused on employment support. Organisations delivering wraparound support work with job seekers to solve for their most pressing needs, which may include support in finding secure housing or transport, or addressing mental or physical health challenges. These non-vocational barriers might be addressed prior to supporting individuals to prepare for and find work, or may be delivered in parallel. As noted in the Empowering YOUTH Initiatives (EYIs) report, "In the case of major non-vocational barriers, the EYIs facilitated improved social wellbeing in the process of optimising employment outcomes" (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022, p.71).

**Job guarantees** typically involve the government making an unconditional job offer at (at least) the minimum wage, and may be targeted to a particular cohort. There is emerging evidence that job guarantees can be effective in galvanising job creation and matching, particularly at a local level. Job guarantees can work as a 'stepping stone' to mainstream employment (May Lam, interview) or can help deliver the broader wellbeing benefits of employment to individuals who are highly unlikely to find work in mainstream employment (see box, right).

**A job guarantee program for people who are unemployed for at least 12 months is being piloted in Marienthal, Austria.** The policy recognises that some job seekers who face complex barriers to work may never achieve mainstream employment in the private sector. Rather than individualising this systemic issue, and mandating that job seekers complete compulsory job search activities, the jobs guarantee program provides individuals with a publicly-funded job, so they can access the benefits of employment. The Marienthal pilot includes voluntary participation in a job that is well-paid, meaningful and co-designed with participants, alongside access to wraparound support. See the [case studies](#) section for more information.

# The current system takes a highly individualised approach, which is focused on narrow employment outcomes (5 of 5)

## 2.5 The fragmented system is difficult for individuals to navigate, exacerbated by overlapping programs, multiple points of entry and different eligibility requirements

There is a web of services, programs and providers funded by the various levels of government that aim to support job seekers into work or training. This is further complicated by the delivery of additional, overlapping approaches delivered by the private and nonprofit sectors. Each of the different services and programs have a different set of eligibility requirements and entry points, creating an incredibly complex environment for job seekers to navigate. The eligibility requirements and entry points for additional services to support with non-vocational barriers only further add to the complexity and significant 'cognitive load' on job seekers. As previously mentioned, humans have a finite amount of cognitive resources. The complexity of locating, navigating, applying for and engaging with multiple services can create significant cognitive load on job seekers, leading to complete disengagement and disinterest in initiatives that are intended to be helpful. Without a single source of truth or single point of contact, job seekers can fall through the cracks. This is particularly problematic for young people, as the youth space is saturated and complicated, and young people who disengage from employment or training can "disappear" from the system entirely (Ruth Hunt, interview).

Wraparound services and place-based approaches attempt to help job seekers to navigate the fragmented system, and to help job seekers to identify and access services that address their support needs. Wraparound services, as mentioned on the [previous slide](#), support individuals with their most pressing needs, including non-vocational barriers, in addition to providing employment support. Wraparound services also help job seekers to navigate the system by providing one key point of contact. These approaches are particularly effective when delivered in a place-based way, as organisations can develop the deep, local networks required to effectively refer job seekers to local services, training opportunities and employers. Some programs, typically place-based, adopt a brokerage model to help leverage existing services in the local area.

There is some evidence that TtW providers can act as brokerage services by connecting young job seekers to the support that they need. However, the extent to which this practice occurs consistently or effectively is unclear. Some experts highlighted the depth of networks that TtW providers have with the local community and the innovative approaches that they adopt to encourage young people to engage (for example, by setting up 'youth hubs', as we heard during our interview with Ruth Hunt). Conversely, other experts expressed some scepticism about how different TtW was from mainstream Workforce Australia provider. Nonetheless, many experts advocated for the need for place-based, wraparound services, particularly for disadvantaged job seekers such as young people and parents.

*In the Marienthal jobs guarantee program, participants receive "a lot of tailored support coming through the program via interaction with social workers and working within the social enterprise. Social workers also assist with helping participants to apply for the jobs and relevant paperwork, as well as relevant [wraparound support] services" - Lukas Lehner, University of Oxford*

*"It's really hard to get young people to ask for help, and to get that communication line right. Having a well-established and known one entry point across programs run by the community, local, [state] and federal governments, and philanthropic organisations; as well as a no-wrong door approach between different programs, would help people find the help they need. Eligibility and targeting of programs has a place, but when access to services is tightly controlled and this isn't coordinated at the local level in a place-based way, program eligibility risks creating gaps in the services as well as overlaps and duplication" - Andrew Shaw, DEWR*

# Employers are a critical actor in the employment services system, but they are generally disconnected and disengaged from it (1 of 2)

## 3.1 Very few employers engage with service providers, and many hold negative stereotypes about the job seekers referred by providers

The proportion of employers using service providers is declining, falling from 18% to 4% between 2007 and 2019 (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2018; Thomas, 2021). The priority of employers is to find suitable job seekers to fill their job vacancies. However, employers are often frustrated when they receive a large quantity of mismatched applications from job seekers and mismatched referrals from service providers (Social Research Centre, 2018). This occurs because job seekers are financially incentivised to submit job applications to a large number of employers, even if they don't match or want the job (to meet their MORs), and service providers are financially incentivised to maximise the number of job seekers who find employment (to obtain performance payments), regardless of whether the job seeker is job ready or best suited to the employer's needs (Ingold et al., 2023).

The frustration that employers can experience when engaging with service providers, as well as the lack of familiarity with engaging with service providers, can create 'inertia', whereby employers continue to advertise roles and recruit in the way that they are familiar with (for example, via mainstream job boards, such as Seek). Although there are government incentives to encourage employers to recruit job seekers who participate in employment services, such incentives may have limited uptake due to a lack of employer awareness of the initiatives, or due to complexity in the administrative effort required to apply for subsidies. There is also concern that employers' reluctance to engage with service providers may be driven by negative stereotypes, where job seekers referred by service providers are perceived as deficient or less motivated than other people who apply for work through mainstream channels (Thomas, 2021). This stigma is felt by job seekers, who worry about how they will be perceived by prospective employers (Social Research Centre, 2018).

Some research has shown that employers who work with service providers report that they do experience benefits (Ingold et al., 2023). Benefits include access to financial savings (from free recruitment services and subsidies); support with HR functions such as onboarding, and; the opportunity to work with disadvantaged job seekers as a way to progress their corporate social responsibility goals. However, there may be self-selection bias in these findings, as the employers likely to use service providers are likely to be those that found the engagement to be beneficial, so the value for 'average' employers engaging with service providers is unclear.

*"If employers were more aware or held the welfare to work system in higher esteem, [they would realise that] it's actually a really easy way to find employees... [the turnover of service provider contracts] must also have an impact on employer engagement" - Dr Siobhan O'Sullivan, UNSW*

*"You need an intermediary because there are multiple different providers who are reaching out to multiple different organisations, and the employer needs to field the providers" - May Lam, Per Capita*

**Intermediaries who connect job seekers and employers, and provide job seeker support, have shown success in engaging employers.** As an example, YearUp is US-based year-long program for disadvantaged young adults who are motivated to do well. The program provides training (including industry-specific technical skills and transferable skills), wraparound support services, and strong connections to employment through internships and job matching. A recent evaluation (see [Fein & Dastrup, 2022](#)) found average quarterly earnings for participants were 28% higher than non-participants. Deep engagement with employers, including employer financial contributions, were identified as two of the key elements of success for the program.

# Employers are a critical actor in the employment services system, but they are generally disconnected and disengaged from it (2 of 2)

## 3.2 Employers strongly prefer to recruit individuals who are job ready and experienced, and the lack of investment in upskilling job seekers is contributing to a shrinking talent pool available to address chronic skill shortages

Employers' strong preference for recruiting individuals with experience and who are able to be highly productive from day one can systematically disadvantage job seekers with limited experience or with complex barriers to employment. Although employers are facing significant skills shortages and are talking about the 'war for talent', we heard from a number of experts that employers have limited appetite to recruit 'risky hires', such as young people, apprentices, individuals with limited experience or individuals who are 'different from them' (i.e. who are highly disadvantaged). As noted by May Lam, "employers prefer somebody else to take that headache and hassle [of training up job seekers with limited experience] away from them" (interview).

Employers typically do not see that it is their responsibility to train and support inexperienced job seekers, which has negative impacts on both job seekers and employers. As noted by Lisa Fowkes, "the culture of training people up and investing in a future workforce has really fallen away" (interview). Therefore, the pool of talent that is "good enough" to meet employers' job readiness standards is shrinking, which further exacerbates the impact of skills shortages on employers.

Further, employers' aversion to recruiting inexperienced job seekers can entrench job seekers in a cycle of unemployment, where no employer wants to recruit them and give them the experience needed in order for them to become 'attractive' enough to hire. Young people are particularly likely to experience this cycle, given they are more likely to be inexperienced. There is an urgent need to build evidence of the return on investment for employers who recruit disadvantaged job seekers, to help create the conditions for this to become commonplace.

*"We "need a combination of carrots and sticks before they [employers] can access subsidies or hire migrant workers... They need to be hiring from disadvantaged groups... There is a need to push employers on this, rather than just suggest or wish" - Jim Stanford, Centre for Future Work*

*"Many employers have become complacent – they've forgotten how to bring different types of people into their workplace, especially people who have very limited experience." - Lisa Fowkes, SVA*

A number of experts noted the important role of intermediaries who can connect employers and job seekers. Intermediaries can play an important role in training and supporting disadvantaged job seekers, to mitigate the risk for employers (as in the case of sectoral employment programs or Group Training Organisations). Intermediaries can also play a role in supporting employers to create and craft jobs to be better suited for disadvantaged job seekers, (as in the case of social enterprises, or programs like GROW Geelong). Many experts noted that intermediation with employers is likely to be more effective on a local level, where intermediaries have strong relationships with employers, and is likely to be most helpful for small and medium businesses who lack the HR capacity to recruit and support job seekers, especially those with limited experience or non-vocational barriers to employment.

### **Place-based intermediaries that work with employers to create inclusive jobs and workplaces can support disadvantaged job seekers.**

For example, the G21 Regional Opportunities for Work (GROW) initiative, launched in 2014, aims to address disadvantage in areas of high unemployment through collaboration between businesses, government and community organisations. GROW encourages social procurement (i.e. purchasing from local businesses who employ people from GROW communities), and works with employers to develop inclusive workplaces, which are supportive of workers from disadvantaged backgrounds (see the [case studies](#) section for more detail).



# There is a severe lack of understanding about what works, for who and why, hindering effective feedback loops within the system (1 of 4)

## 4.1 There is little robust evidence of what works; system actors need mechanisms to test, measure, share learnings and scale-up effective policies and programs

Despite the many iterations of the employment services system, and the presence of programs and services being delivered by various departments, agencies, nonprofits and private sector actors, there is little robust evidence of what *actually* works to improve outcomes for job seekers, particularly for individuals with complex barriers to employment, such as young people and parents. A core issue is the fact that there is no agreed-upon definition of success in employment services among the various actors, and current government approaches to define and measure success are blunt (discussed further on the [next slide](#)). In fact, “While econometric analyses and large-scale evaluations of active labour market programs show that policy instruments such as enforced job searching effectively reduce *benefit claiming*, the evidence is mixed on whether they move people *into work*... There is international evidence to suggest that they push others to drop off benefits to non-employment – the hidden unemployed.” (Kluve 2010; Card et al. 2015; and Martin 2015: cited in O’Sullivan et al., 2021). These findings further highlight the urgent need for more effective tools to measure success and to inform the government’s approach to procuring employment services.

Further, although there are actors in the system piloting and trying out new and different approaches to supporting disadvantaged groups of job seekers, there is a lack of a sector-wide process and culture of measuring programs, sharing learnings with others and using learnings to inform future approaches. Experts identified two key drivers of this lack of culture: limited capability in evaluating programs, and the lack of a governance mechanism to facilitate continuous improvement. In order for measurement to enable continuous improvement, there needs to be continuous piloting and evaluating on a program-by-program basis. Evaluation is incredibly important in understanding *why* certain programs achieve greater success than others in practice, to identify the elements of success that should continue to be scaled-up and tested in other contexts. However, we heard that there doesn’t appear to be a culture of evaluation among the employment services sector (including among nonprofits). Supporting organisations to collect data, evaluate programs and use this information to inform future decisions, while “embedding a culture of evaluation, will, in the end, make a big difference to making progress in this space [employment services]” (Dr Jeff Borland, UoM, interview).

Finally, there is a clear need for governance mechanisms to facilitate effective feedback loops, to ensure that learnings from providers and organisations are shared, understood and applied in practice. Without this convening mechanism (as it is called by BSL – see box, right), there is a risk that the great work and evidence gathered from evaluations fails to achieve its outcome of enabling continuous improvement and positive momentum across the system.

*“A part of the picture is educating organisations about the value of collecting data for their own purposes [beyond compliance]... the education and culture about data could have a big impact” - Dr Jeff Borland, UoM*

**An example of a convening mechanism to create a system of continuous improvement** is the Transition to Work Community of Practice (TtW CoP) established BSL, which is summarised in the [case studies](#) section of this report. Importantly, the CoP not only included representation from service providers, but also included representatives from the government to ensure that policymakers understood how policy decisions were impacting behaviour and outcomes in practice. “They [the government] could actually understand the dynamics of the performance of the providers because they had access to real world information” (Shelley Mallett, interview).

# There is a severe lack of understanding about what works, for who and why, hindering effective feedback loops within the system (2 of 4)

## 4.2 Tools used to measure success of services are blunt; better measures (including job seeker feedback and human capability measures) are needed

The metrics used to determine the success of employment services providers and other programs are “blunt” as the measures focus on simplistic employment outcomes. Key success metrics include binary measures of whether the job seeker exited employment services, started and completed training, or if they met employment length thresholds such as 12 and 26 weeks. The current measures fail to recognise when job seekers make progress that “moves them up” in the path toward employment, including progress in addressing non-vocational barriers to employment, which are often important precursors to employment outcomes.

Without nuanced and effective methods to measure the success of providers and programs, policymakers are severely constrained in their ability to identify, fund and scale-up effective programs, and prevent sinking funding and resources into ineffective programs. Ultimately, this means that the government must rely on simplistic measures to determine what services they procure from service providers (May Lam, interview). Two key proposed changes to the tools used to measure success of employment services and programs mentioned by experts were: the inclusion of job seeker feedback and the inclusion of human capability measures.

**Job seeker feedback:** Job seeker feedback about service providers is currently captured via high-level surveys. However, experts highlighted that there can be a limited correlation between job seeker satisfaction and employment outcomes. For example, Alison Inglis from DEWR spoke about a recent TtW evaluation which showed that “providers who people are less satisfied with, can have higher likelihood [of helping job seekers] to find employment” (interview). Other experts, such as Kristin O’Connell, mentioned during an interview that job seeker feedback may be inflated as they have low expectations of service providers. There is a clear need to ensure that job seeker feedback is prompted and captured in a detailed, nuanced and timely way, in order to understand what progress has been made, how the service provider delivered support, and what job seekers’ needs are. Feedback should inform continuous improvement in services.

**Human capability measures:** There is also a need to capture and measure the progress that job seekers make on the *path* to employment, especially those which may not be reflected in short-term employment outcomes. For example, measures such as job seeker confidence, motivation and feelings of job readiness, as well as progress made toward addressing non-vocational barriers to employment, should be included in measures of program success.

*“All human services have this fundamental problem, that basically it’s difficult for someone ex ante to [know] the quality of the service” - Dr Jeff Borland, UoM*

*“The right place to start in defining success, measures of value, and what to pay for is to go to the source: unemployed people, and the employers who have the potential to hire them” (Per Capita, 2023)*

*“At its core, TtW is aimed at supporting human capability development and the reports we receive indicate participants and employers feel supported by TtW providers. We also see other positive indicators, such as improvements in wellbeing and mental health, so they’re likely to be better off in the long-term and are well connected and supported by the system.” - Ruth Hunt, DEWR*

# There is a severe lack of understanding about what works, for who and why, hindering effective feedback loops within the system (3 of 4)

## 4.3 Policies, programs and services have been developed in a predominantly top-down approach, with little meaningful co-design with people with lived experience

The current system has been designed *for* job seekers, rather than *by and with* them. Many processes, obligations and requirements have been designed based on iterations from historic decisions, rather than taking a human-centred approach and determining how a particular process will enable the ultimate outcome of supporting job seekers, and how it will impact individuals' day-to-day lives. Well-intentioned policies can fall down in their implementation and create unintended consequences. An example of a well-intentioned approach falling down in its implementation can be found in the types of activities that are compulsory for ParentsNext participants. The ParentsNext program is a pre-employment program and often focuses on facilitating parents' relationships within their community. Therefore, activities such as storytime or swimming lessons can feature on participants' Job Plans. However, individuals can perceive the mandatory nature of such activities to be patronising, and a trivial activity that can lead to payment suspensions if participants fail to attend. The recent ParentsNext Inquiry also found that minor details, such as the language used in letters that inform people about their transition to the program, creates stress and anxiety (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). When it comes to delivering behaviour change programs, the 'devil is in the detail', and the implementation and delivery of programs is crucial.

Policies and programs should be co-designed with the individuals who are impacted by them. This includes ensuring that the voices of job seekers are heard and elevated, as well as seeking input from other key actors in the system, including service providers, employers and nonprofits. Co-design and consultation can also mitigate against scenarios where what is stipulated in official policy or guidelines doesn't align to what happens in reality. As an example, Job Plans – a document which summarises the activities that a job seeker agrees to undertake as part of their MORs – are *intended* to be co-designed, taking into account job seekers' individual circumstance. In practice, often, Job Plans are “templates that don't meet needs or your life circumstances, you need to fight [for a change to the template]” (Kristin O'Connell, Antipoverty Centre, interview).

Meaningful co-design with people with lived experience (individuals who have recent, direct experience of a particular policy or program) should be taken further than just feedback surveys. Meaningful co-design would involve ensuring that individuals with lived experience provide input into how policies are designed and implemented, and have sufficient opportunity and support to make a significant contribution to such discussions. Some experts, including Kristin O'Connell, spoke about opportunities to engage people with lived experience in the delivery of services in the system – this might include delivering programs to job seekers, or participating in a newly-formed representative governance committee who would hold service providers and policymakers to account.

**Co-designing approaches with people with lived experience ensures that important elements of the initiative are fit-for-purpose.** For example, the jobs offered as part of the jobs guarantee pilot being conducted in Marienthal, Austria were co-designed with program participants. Participants contributed ideas for jobs during the two-month preparatory course. A large proportion of program participants are now working in jobs that were created for them, which are designed to contribute to the community. Jobs were also developed with local stakeholders, including the government, Mayor and local enterprises, to create bespoke opportunities for meaningful work. (See [case studies](#) section for more information).

# There is a severe lack of understanding about what works, for who and why, hindering effective feedback loops within the system (4 of 4)

## 4.4 There is an absence of nuanced, personalised data to inform targeted approaches to support job seekers

Service providers and the government collect a huge amount of job seeker data, primarily via an initial assessment of job seeker circumstances and via regular job seeker compliance monitoring. Easy access to real-time data can be an incredibly powerful tool to provide personalised and timely support to job seekers, and enable service providers to efficiently match job seekers to appropriate vacant roles or training opportunities in the local area. However, there is a need for service providers and other actors in the system to collect and share more nuanced data in order to deliver such personalised approaches.

Job seekers' first foray into handing over data about themselves to the employment services system starts with the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI), which they complete when they first claim employment support. The JSCI implicitly adopts a deficit-based approach, by asking job seekers questions to identify demographic and socioeconomic risk factors for becoming long-term unemployed. These factors include Indigeneity, disability status, criminal conviction history or English proficiency. The JSCI is primarily used as a rationing tool to 'stream' job seekers into different levels of servicing, whereby the most job ready individuals are sent to self-manage their MORs online, while the most disadvantaged job seekers are sent to work with service providers (and the 'stream' of job seekers influences the value of provider incentives when claiming payments for employment outcomes for that individual). The JSCI is conducted as an interview, and job seekers may actively conceal indicators of disadvantage out of fear of judgement or negative consequences. Collecting data for the purposes of rationing services may reinforce negative self-perceptions about barriers to employment. Instead, we need to adopt a holistic approach by asking questions about what type of employment the job seeker is looking for, what their motivations are and the type of support they feel they need.

After the JSCI, most of the data that is collected about job seekers is focused on monitoring compliance with MORs, rather than measuring changes in job seeker needs. There is little systematic collection of data about job seeker motivation or engagement, either from the job seeker or from other individuals in the job seeker's social network. This means service providers often adopt a generic approach to supporting job seekers, which can perpetuate the transactional element of the relationship (as discussed [earlier](#)). There is an opportunity to use data more creatively to enable personalised approaches to supporting job seekers by collecting behavioural data or 'breadcrumbs', and using this data to deliver personalised services. Examples of behavioural data could include measures of whether or not a job seeker opened a communication from service providers or ignored it; how long job seekers took to respond to particular communications; or even the general sentiment of job seeker messages. Job seeker engagement data could be used to trigger a tailored approach to reaching out to job seekers to identify what challenges they are facing and what their needs are, rather than waiting until the end of the reporting period, where MORs may go unmet and job seekers may face payment suspensions as a result.

*"There's the operational use of data to run the system more effectively, and strategic use of data to design a better system...the system has been around long enough that it should be mature enough to de-identify data and make [it] available as a data asset to researchers, rather than kept as a closed shop, so we can really understand what is going on." - Barry Sandison*

# Case studies

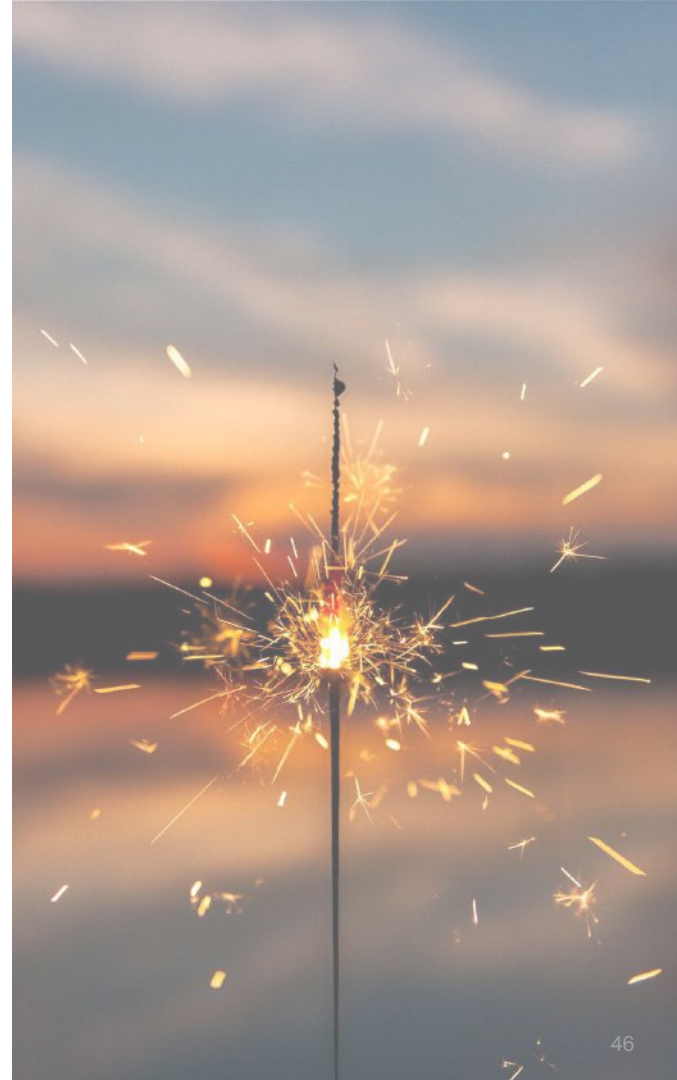
# Introduction to case studies

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This section summarises selected programs that show promising signs of effective approaches to supporting disadvantaged job seekers, particularly young people and parents. For the purposes of this report, we selected a handful of case studies which aligned to multiple challenges or opportunities. In each case study, we have emphasised key aspects of the program or policy to illustrate a particular insight, rather than providing a comprehensive summary of all aspects of the approach. Where we heard about the program during our interviews with experts, we have also incorporated illustrative quotes.

## **The following programs and policies are summarised in this section:**

- The Marienthal jobs guarantee pilot (Marienthal, Austria)
- Transition to Work Community of Practice Model (Australia)
- GROW initiative (VIC, Australia)
- Imagine More (Australia)



# Case study: The Marienthal jobs guarantee pilot

## About the program:

The Marienthal jobs guarantee pilot, launched in Austria in October 2020, offers a blueprint for what a thoughtfully designed and well-funded jobs guarantee program could look like. The program targets people who are long-term unemployed. The implementation of a 'jobs guarantee' can vary greatly, from a universal program where individuals must take a job, to a program offered to a specific cohort on a voluntary basis. The jobs available can be restricted to a specific industry or wide-ranging, and may be shaped by the skills and interests of participants.

## Key features of the Marienthal jobs guarantee program include:

- **Focus on, and measurement of, a broad set of outcomes** - both economic and non-economic well being as well as physical health were outcomes of interest.
- **Targeted approach** - the program is available to residents who have been unemployed for 12 months or longer.
- **Voluntary participation** - not all people are willing, or able, to take part in paid work. Residents can decline the job offer and there are no sanctions for doing so.
- **Well paid, meaningful and co-designed work** - the job guarantee secures three years' employment for minimum wage or higher. Crucially, participants are helped to find, or create, a job based on their skills and knowledge of their community's needs (examples of jobs taken up include carpentry, gardening and elderly care).
- **Support provided for participants' non-vocational needs** - there is a two-month mandatory preparatory course, which includes training and support from counsellors, social workers, occupational therapists and psychologists.

## Evaluation:

The evaluation of the first phase of the pilot, completed by economists at the University of Oxford, has shown that:

- Participants' **incomes rose** and they gained greater financial security.
- Those taking part were **happier**, more **satisfied**, and felt more in control of their lives.
- They had more **meaningful interactions** with others, felt more valued and felt they had more people around them who they could rely on.
- The pilot **eliminated long-term unemployment** while the program was being delivered. It also led to a large reduction in the town's overall unemployment.
- These improvements continued across the **first two years**.

(Kasy and Lehner, 2022)

*"For the target population of long term unemployed participants, the voluntary job guarantee program has numerous positive effects that would not be expected for a pure income transfer of the same size, because there are impacts on time structure, collective purpose, activity, social contacts and social status that are associated with employment." - Maximilian Kasy, University of Oxford professor and pilot evaluator*

**Relevance:** The Marienthal jobs guarantee addresses a number of challenges in the Australian system, as it measures human capability growth, participation is voluntary, the solution (jobs) has been co-designed with participants and wraparound support to address non-vocational barriers is provided. While an ongoing guaranteed job may not be appropriate for the Australian context, a short-term guaranteed job for a targeted cohort as a 'stepping stone' to mainstream work may be effective.

# Case study: Transition to Work Community of Practice Model

## About the program:

Transition to Work (TtW) is a federally-funded program that helps 15-24 year olds transition from school to higher education, training or work. The TtW Community of Practice (TtW CoP) model was established in 2016 by the Brotherhood St Laurence (BSL). It was designed to bring together providers who were delivering the TtW program to enable sharing of expertise across the sector, to reduce the level of competition among providers and to enable the evidence-informed evolution of delivering TtW services. The evaluation summarised in this report refers to the evaluation of the TtW CoP as it was designed by BSL (and it is not an evaluation of the TtW program itself).

*The CoP model includes “feedback loops from job seekers, employers and from the government itself. It’s those loops, making sure that you’re leveraging the expertise and offers in the delivery model [that create] a continuous learning [cycle]” - Shelley Mallett, BSL*

**Relevance:** The TtW CoP model highlights a governance mechanism that enables providers to share best practice and to learn from each other, which is critical to enable a ‘self-learning system’ as discussed earlier in the report. Other elements of the model - including adopting a strengths-based approach, rethinking accountability (away from MORs), and engaging employers - also address key challenges in the current Australian system.

## Evaluation:

Over 2018 and 2019, the Research and Policy Centre and BSL ran an evaluation of the TtW CoP model. The researchers identified the following elements as crucial for driving successful outcomes:

- **Advantaged Thinking** - a way of thinking that combines a strength based approach with more structural considerations. Aiming for a shift in how the government and community sectors invest in young people, and how employers and the community see young people and their capacity to contribute.
- **Harnessing community investment** - the TtW CoP delivers programs with, rather than to, the local community. This includes forging partnerships with local government, employers, education provider, service and sporting clubs and community organisations. The aim is to foster a sense of community ownership over the issue of local youth employment and accountability over how it is addressed.
- **A convening component** - BSL acted as an enabling organisation to foster collaboration and good practice among employment service providers. By holding regular meetings between providers they were able to facilitate evidence-informed innovation and capacity building. They were also able to bring together cross-sectoral stakeholders to co-produce and implement policies. These stakeholders included an Advisory Group of industry experts, a National Youth Alliance and the National Employer Reference Group.
- **A four-phase model** - The model includes: 1. Guidance and exploration; 2. Work preparation; 3. Workplace opportunities; and 4. Post-placement support) balanced with the flexibility to develop context-specific ways to deliver the activities in each phase.
- **Activating employers** - work opportunity placements are crucial for young people, through building local employer relationships and facilitating an advantaged thinking approach, more work opportunity placements were created.
- **The Deal** - a shift from compliance to reciprocity. The Deal is involves young people and service providers working together towards a common goal with mutual accountability.

(Bond and Keys, 2020)



# Case study: GROW initiative

## About the program:

The GROW (G21 Regional Opportunities for Work) initiative, launched in 2014 in Geelong and is a joint initiative of the Give Where You Live Foundation and the G21 Alliance (see [GROW, 2023](#)). It supports long-term job seekers who face significant barriers to employment, including limited networks, training, experience and transport. The GROW program focuses on working with local businesses, government and community organisations to create job opportunities for disadvantaged job seekers.

The approach involves four key elements:

- **Spend local:** Encouraging signatories to procure goods and services from local businesses
- **Spend social:** Encouraging signatories to procure goods and services from businesses that employ people from GROW communities, to create growth in those businesses and increase job opportunities for additional job seekers
- **Be inclusive:** Working with employers to create inclusive workplaces that are supportive of disadvantaged job seekers, which may include providing internships or work experience, or job crafting to create bespoke roles for individuals with complex needs
- **Advocate and collaborate:** Encouraging businesses to join the GROW Network of signatories to be involved in change for the region, and to collaborate with each other

The GROW team works with organisations to design an action plan to specify the activities that they will commit to taking, aligned to the four elements of the program. Every 12 months, progress against the action plan is reviewed and the plan is iterated as needed. Participating businesses also continue to contribute to the GROW Network by sharing information, tools, stories and learnings at regular meetings.

## Evaluation:

The [2022 GROW annual report](#) (GROW, 2022) showed:

- Over 500 jobs created since the programs commencement
- 130 signatories and 1,779 suppliers
- 1,420 young people supported to re-engage in learning
- 228 paid employment outcomes including apprenticeships and traineeships
- For every dollar signatories spent with local suppliers, \$2.04 is generated in the local economy
- \$249M spend with a resulting estimated local benefit of \$508M

*“GROW is particularly focused on addressing long-term unemployment and supporting suburbs in our region with higher levels of disadvantage. GROW seeks to support and influence government and business practices to deliver social outcomes for the G21 region, via social procurement. GROW does this by working across sectors and industries, with businesses, community organisations, training organisations and government, to identify and deliver opportunities for inclusive employment pathways and jobs for people facing barriers to employment. GROW also supports business and government to identify opportunities and direct their spending (their purchasing of goods and services), towards social benefit suppliers in our region - including Social Enterprises, Aboriginal Owned Enterprises and Disability Enterprises, in order to deliver additional social and inclusive economic outcomes for our local community.” - Meg Price, Give Where You Live Foundation*

**Relevance:** The GROW initiative is a key example of a place-based approach that effectively engages with businesses to create meaningful change for disadvantaged job seekers. GROW also highlights an effective way to adopt a strengths-based approach when crafting bespoke jobs that suit the needs of job seekers. This is the antithesis of the current deficit-based approach in the employment services system.

# Case study: Imagine More

## About the program:

Imagine More is a charity funded by the Department of Social Services (DSS), which provides support, networking opportunities, resources and training programs to individuals and families living with disabilities (see [Imagine More, 2023](#)). The program partners with key international academics and practitioners, such as Milton Tyree and Mark Gold and Associates, to advocate for a customised employment approach. Employment is based on the individual strengths, interests and conditions of successful employment for the job seeker and the unmet needs of the employer.

The customised employment approach is a comprehensive process that involves understanding the unique skill sets of individuals with disabilities and matching them with appropriate job opportunities. The process begins with a 'Discovery Process', where the job seeker and their social network provide input and feedback to gather information about their interests, skills, environmental preferences, and employment goals. Observations from peers regarding the job seeker at home and in the community can assist in identifying interests and strengths, particularly when a person is unable to verbalise these.

Once this information is gathered, providers work with the job seeker to identify potential employers in the community that align with their interests. This may involve visits to these businesses to give the job seeker a better understanding of the work environment and tasks involved. The Discovery Process typically takes around 40 hours and results in a vocational profile of the job seeker, which is used to guide training, support, and facilitate connections with potential employers. The Discovery Process is particularly useful for young people with limited career experience and can also help to identify the existing social capital of the job seeker, such as information and social networks.

## Evaluation:

To the best of our knowledge, the Imagine More program has yet to undergo a formal impact evaluation. The Imagine More website does reference that participants report high satisfaction with the program, that they feel more motivated, confident and hopeful.

The Imagine More program is based on the customised employment approach, which was developed in the United States in 2001 and has since been widely utilised. Unlike traditional employment methods, this approach centers on the individual's unique strengths and abilities, rather than job vacancies, and collaborates with both the job seeker and the employer to create a job opportunity that meets the needs of both parties. An emerging evidence base supports the effectiveness of customised employment approaches, with some programs achieving employment rates of 45-71% and high levels of job retention after 12 months (Inge et. al. 2018), as well as increased quality of life outcomes, and higher wages (Riesen et al. 2015).

*"Drawing on the person's wider social network to develop a customised plan for employment is really effective and empowering, since the people around you often notice strengths, interests and possible career paths, that you may not be able to identify on your own." - Jan Kruger, Imagine More*

**Relevance:** Imagine More is an example of a strengths-based approach to developing bespoke employment opportunities for job seekers with diverse needs. The model also demonstrates the value of tapping into a job seeker's wider social networks, as opposed to the current individualised approach of the employment services system.



# Next steps

# Next steps

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This report summarises insights from 27 interviews with experts, findings from a complementary rapid literature scan and insights from behavioural science. Our initial research has revealed a number of challenges and opportunities in the employment services system, namely:


1. **Employment service providers** operate within a set of structures, incentives and practices that don't serve the needs of young people or parents
2. The system takes a highly individualised approach focused on narrow employment outcomes when supporting **job seekers**
3. **Employers** are a critical actor in the system, but they are generally disconnected and disengaged
4. There is a severe lack of understanding about what works, for who and why, hindering effective feedback loops within the system

**The next phase of the project involves primary research with job seekers and people with lived experience.** The research is intended to include fieldwork at Western Sydney, West Melbourne, Geelong and Logan-Beaudesert. At each site, we will endeavour to meet with a service provider working with young people and/or parents, as well as contacts from organisations delivering complementary services (such as place-based or wraparound support approaches). Findings from the rapid evidence review, interviews and fieldwork will be a key input to co-design workshops with people with lived experience to inform the solutions developed as part of this project.





# Appendices



# **Appendix 1: Summary of key government programs in the employment services system**

# Summary of key federal employment services programs

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Below is a summary of key federal employment services programs, which many job seekers participate in. Job seekers may also participate in additional programs or initiatives run by state or local governments, or by other organisations such as nonprofits. This list is not intended to be exhaustive.

**Workforce Australia:** Workforce Australia is the mainstream federal employment program, with a caseload of approximately 615,000 job seekers as of April 2023 (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2023a). Job seekers receiving JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and Parenting Payments are eligible, and are required to meet their Mutual Obligation Requirements (MORs) to avoid a payment suspension, using the Points Based Activation System (PBAS). There are two subgroups within the program: Workforce Australia Online (the most job-ready job seekers, who self-manage meeting their MORs online for a maximum of 12 months) and Workforce Australia Services (job seekers with more complex needs, who either require support from a job agent, have requested to work with a service provider or have been in Workforce Australia Online for more than 12 months) (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2022). The majority of participants are in Workforce Australia Services and work with service providers, while a sizeable proportion are streamed into Workforce Australia Online.

**Transition to Work (TtW):** Transition to Work (TtW) is an employment program designed to assist young people aged 15-24 to transition to training or employment (Workskil Australia, n.d.). TtW is a much smaller program than Workforce Australia. Eligible young people receiving income support payments can choose to participate in TtW instead of Workforce Australia, and can choose to opt out of the program after attending their first appointment (Workforce Australia, n.d.). Young people aged 15-24 who are not receiving income support payments can choose to participate in TtW as a volunteer. All participants must complete 25 hours of activities per week. Unlike Workforce Australia, there is only one TtW provider in each of Australia's 51 employment regions. Young people can typically participate in TtW for a maximum of 18 months, after which they are referred to Workforce Australia.

**ParentsNext:** ParentsNext is a pre-employment program for parents and carers who have been receiving a Parenting Payment for at least 6 months, have a child between 9 months and 6 years old, and have some level of disadvantage (e.g. have received income support continuously for at least four years) (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2023b). The MORs for ParentsNext participants were paused in early 2023, and participants are no longer required to attend appointments with their service provider, to agree to a participation plan (outlining activities aligned to a their education or employment goals) or to complete the activities outlined in the participation plan (Services Australia, 2023). Participants can do these activities, but they won't face payment suspensions if they don't.

**Disability Employment Services (DES):** Disability Employment Services (DES) is comprised of two services: the Disability Management Service for job seekers with a disability or health condition who need assistance to find a job, and the Employment Support Service for those who have a permanent disability and therefore require regular, ongoing support to maintain employment (Department of Social Services, 2023).

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